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ABSTRACT

The question of the extent to which effective leadership in vocational education and training (VET) depends on the specific context in which it occurs was examined. Data were collected from the following sources: an intensive literature analysis; studies of purposive sample of 12 diverse VET sites across Australia; and individual interviews with 48 individuals and group interviews with approximately 60 individuals at the 12 sites. The data from the sites were assembled and subjected to preliminary analysis. Selected emerging results were reported. The following attributes were deemed important leadership characteristics: (1) envisages future trends and their impacts on current strategies; (2) demonstrates interpersonal skills by talking and listening to others and establishing rapport; and (3) works to understand the personalities, motivations, and other diverse qualities of people. The following different "takes" on effective VET leadership were identified: (1) leadership is initiated and carried by a single "leader" or manager; (2) leadership is encouragement of each employee; (3) leaders must see the big picture and translate it into each staff member's own contribution so they perform at their best; (4) people are essentially born leaders; and (5) leadership is about enabling people to develop and grow within an environment of increasing complexity and change. (Contains 33 references.) (MN)

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Effective Leadership in Vocational Education and Training

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Paper presented to the AVETRA Conference, Hilton Hotel, Adelaide, 29–30 March 2001

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Introduction

The research reported on in this paper arose from the curiosity of the researchers about the question, 'How generic is "generic"?'. That is, is 'effective leadership in VET' comprised of a set of attributes that can be transported from place to place, context to context? Or is effective VET leadership dependent to a greater or a lesser extent on aspects of the context in which it occurs? It seems to us that this is a crucial question to answer if we are to determine the VET leadership criteria and professional development needs in times of such rapidly changing VET contexts.

The study is limited in scale to an intensive literature analysis and data collected from 12 diverse VET sites and around 60 individuals. The literature analysis is on-going, the data collection is now near complete, much of the transcription is done, and preliminary impressions have been gathered from the research assistants and the data itself. This paper therefore represents a view of first impressions only, and impressions that are contained to only some sections of the data and from some sites.

Before reporting these impressions of emerging analyses, however, we will begin by outlining the main background issues, ideas and literature that have informed our thinking. Of course, this thinking also guides the impressions, reported later, that we are likely to gain from the data.

Backdrop

The research includes an element of crystal ball gazing, since one of its aims is to attempt to capture the elements of diversity in which VET is playing out, in the hope that this diversity is some kind of snapshot of possible future VET contexts. We want, therefore, to be able to say at the end of the project, "On the basis of present known diverse VET contexts, this is what we can say about VET leadership requirements for future planning". Since VET contexts are already diverse and will likely become more so, a requirement for grounding the project therefore seemed to be a cross-disciplinary analysis of the literature associated with leadership. Literature from all possible sources and disciplines were gathered, and are being analysed in groups. We will here list the categories for the full literature review to be reported at a later time. They fall under the headings of Education, Training, Management , Organisational development, Economics and Social sciences (other – e.g., health, nursing, medicine, etc).

Next are the issues or problem areas identified in the literature so far, in relation to the questions for this study.

Conceptualisation of leadership

The first and most important problem is in fact a methodological one. It is the way in which the conceptualisation of leadership and the issues surrounding it (as in the previous section) is investigated in this project. Specifically, how does the project avoid re-discovering old platitudes about 'good leadership'?

A search of executive position advertisements and the web shows reveals any number of (converging) assets associated with leadership, such as vision, interpersonal skills, management skills and the breadth of knowledge outside the specific field in question. The methodological section earlier in this paper describes some empirical ways in which this project avoids the problem of re-discovering the obvious and focuses on the practical issues of contextualised leadership at the moment when interaction about these contextualised accounts of leadership occurs.

The problem of 'context' and interaction

Consistent with the project's aim to ensure a fresh yet empirical and valid analysis of effective VET leadership, the question of context arises as a central question for the study. What *is* the nature of context in which leadership occurs? Does globalisation really affect leadership? What aspect/s of the leadership context apply at any given time or at any given stage of the leadership process? How does this tie in with the study's assumption that effective leadership is about managing change?

Essentially, context is defined as "what is going on in the social terrain" (Rassool, 1999, p. 220). Rassool also provides a useful elaboration of social context and its organising principles, which are summarised in the following table:

Table: The social context: A view of its organising principles

Systems	e.g. economic system, production system, polity, social relations, sociocultural relationships and kinships, community, values, beliefs, social principles, management, systems of control; social rights and entitlements
Structures	e.g. social policy including development policy, language policy, social, political, economic, cultural and communications infrastructure, resources, trade unions, discourse, power interests, self-identity, stocks of knowledge, technologies, trade agreements, race, gender, class subjectivities, collective, institutional and individual strategies, communities
Practices	e.g. media, education, religion, culture; social group, race and gender relations, language and communication, forms of control including censorship, discourse
Processes	e.g. legal, economic, political, technological, social networks, power networks, social relationships, communication within and between individuals/groups, interaction between individuals/groups and social practices, production and consumption of goods and services, individual/community/interest group action, distribution of resources, strategic actions
Institutions	e.g. cultural, juridical, religious, industrial, political, economic, work organisations; financial; health and social welfare; military, telecommunications, mass communications industry – and the frameworks of power in which they are grounded

Regarding the principles of an appropriate methodology for framing and analysing leadership in relation to its contexts, Cole, Engestrom and Vasquez, Erickson and Schultz (1997, p. 30) prescribe four types of evidence from which inferences can be drawn in a study of this kind. These, they state, form the requisite testing points for a single case-derived model of interaction. They are these:

1. During those moments the model designates as moments of transition, descriptively specifiable shifts in interactional performance form are occurring;
2. After a moment of transition, specific forms and functions of communication behavior – ways of listening and speaking, topics, postural positions, etc, - are differently distributed in contrast to their frequency of presence or absence and their sequential position of occurrence during the time prior to the moment designated by the model as a moment of transition;

3. After the moment of transition, kinds of interactional behavior, which, before the juncture were sanctioned if present (or absent), are no longer sanctioned by participants if these behaviors are present (or absent), and kinds of behavior previously not sanctioned are now sanctioned, i.e., participants behave as if rules of appropriateness differ from before the juncture to after it…;
4. If, in a…session, the participants themselves or other informants are shown the juncture and its immediate surround, their accounts of what is socially appropriate before and after the juncture agree with analytically descriptive evidence of types (2) and (3) above.

It will be seen that this set of requirements embraces the main requirements of methodological appropriateness for this project. There is the notion of change accounted for through the notion of 'moments of transition'. The four points direct the research's attention at the interaction as the source of data, and the points prescribe the empirical accounts of interaction between context and subject (leadership in this case) as the basis for judging 'what counts as context in this case'.

Methodology

The methodology is designed to achieve the purpose set for the project by building knowledge on the topic of contexts and characteristics of VET leadership in a range of ten identified contexts. The research is based on the grounded theory-generation and research techniques of, for example, Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Spradley (1980) under the general quality guidelines for qualitative research, such as member-checking and triangulation, detailed in Lincoln and Guba (1985).

This methodology is distinctive, and pays more attention to empirical matters than a simple thematic analysis and a writing up of a 'case study'. Case study has a highly significant use as an analytic tool, and in this research it is supplemented by two major features: (a) The research employs a knowledge-building methodology (as opposed to a traditional theory-testing approach), particularly appropriate when there is little research in a particular area, which is indeed the case with leadership in VET; (b) the array of analytic tools includes a set of particularly vigorous empirical data analytic procedures.

In order to ensure the veracity and durability of the knowledge on which the project outcomes are derived, the gap in research addressed by the project will be addressed by the analysis of two contingents: (a) the characteristics of VET leaders in ten diverse settings, and (b) the nature of those characteristics in relation to cross-site transferability – that is, which of the characteristics could be described as generic and which context specific.

Selecting the sites/contexts

The research team recognises that there will always be a major place for the public provision of VET, be this TAFE and/or some other system, such as the VET in schools programs. For this reason, more than half the respondents across all sites are TAFE/public providers. However, because of the future-looking element of this project, we recognise that VET could 'take off' in any number of different forms, as the on-line learning movement has shown. In addition, the 'new sites for VET' will become the province of the public provider in some way, as in the way TAFE has embraced on-line learning as a part of its suite of provider modes.

In order to ensure that the project captures the widest possible range of contexts in which effective VET leadership might be an issue, the sites, or contexts, in which VET takes place have been selected according to a purposeful sampling model (e.g., Patton, 1990). The criteria used for selection are the spread across:

1. States and Territories
2. Urban/rural
3. Equity groups
4. Size of provider
5. Majority of sites RTOs but at least one to be independent
6. Type of provider (private, TAFE, group training, VET-in-Schools, community based, online
7. Period of establishment
8. Relative ease of access to site and participant availability given budget constraints

Data sources
There are three sources of data for the project:

1 Document collection and analysis
Documents related to the goals and identity of the organisation were requested and gathered, and when on-site, additional documents relevant to the project were collected for later examination.

2 Individual interviews
Application of the purposeful sampling of different VET leadership contexts using these criteria established the following list:

Site	State	Contexts	Interviewees
1	NSW	Large urban public VET provider, high level of industry & commercial activities	7
2	NSW	Higher Education VET provider	5
3	NSW	Youth focused VET provider	3
4	Vic	Dispersed and multi-campus regional public VET provider.	6
5	Vic	VET in a group training company.	3
6	Vic	Industry based VET consultant	2
7	Qld	Large urban public provider: equity focus (Indigenous, Migrant)	5
8	Qld	Private training organisation	3
9	Qld	Indigenous provider: Non- registered provider	4
10	SA	Rural community based VET development	3
11	WA	Equity VET group	4
12	TAS	Rural VET in Schools	3
			48

3 Group interviews
In addition to the individual interviews, some group interviews were conducted. These took place in the larger sites (in terms of staffing), where the individual interviews were supplemented by a group discussion both with those who were involved in the individual interviews, and other staff invited in for additional dynamics and perspectives. The total

participants therefore number around 60 (TBC), including the 48 involved in individual interviews.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed ready for analysis.

Procedure
Each interviewee involved in the face-to-face interviews received a letter in which the above three means of data collection were explained to them. The interviewee also received a questionnaire which gathered their personal information, as well as information about their organisation, such as, organisational structure, mission statement and objectives. The interviewee was then requested to reflect on their leadership roles, and write-up their thoughts concerning five of the different contexts in which they work and lead. They were also asked to write up their thoughts on what constituted leadership in VET, given the shifting contexts and organisational characteristics involved in VET in contemporary times.

The final part of the preparatory work consisted of presenting a single page of 28 different leadership characteristics. These characteristics where gathered from a wide range of different sources, starting with accepted standard academic texts on the subject, recent VET listings of leadership competencies, a comprehensive selection of newspaper employment advertisements, and other literature on leadership. Participants were asked to choose ten, which they considered the most important for leadership, and then to prioritise them. They were also asked to add any of their own, which they thought were important, and to place these into the prioritised list.

The preparatory work completed by each interviewee was then forwarded to the person doing the interview, and used together with a semi-structured questionnaire in the interview situation. Each interview took about one hour. The interviews primarily elicited stories from the participant in which they and others exercised leadership in VET. It focused on experiences of change: past, present and future, where leadership was seen to be exercised by themselves and others in the various contexts that they had already identified. Finally they were also asked to consider all the contexts that their organisation has to function in. They were requested to discuss as to which contexts they thought would have the most impact on how leaders do their work in their organisation over the next five years and to think about how leadership roles and responsibilities would change to fit these contexts.

The final part of the data gathering, aimed at the larger and more complex sites, consisted of a focus group discussion between participants of a particular site. Here the aim was to allow a facilitated group dynamic to work eliciting the participants interactive experiences of leadership in its different contexts. It also aimed at facilitating, with associated discussion, a consensually derived and prioritised list of up to five of the most important roles and responsibilities of leadership in their organisation.

Analysis of data
A rigorous and empirical form of building pre-specified and reliable knowledge outcomes is one called 'Instrumental Case Study' (Stake 1996). This is supplemented by a set of analytic techniques under the field of ethnomethodologically informed Conversation Analysis. Social actors talk into being the aspects of their lifeworlds relevant to them. Hence, 'context' consists of renewable resources, different aspects of which affect different activities. As people disclose these resources to their activities, these resources become available for scrutiny and are accountable at the point of talk. That is, the empirical data for analysing *what counts as 'contexts'* for those people is only available through analysing people's talk, available through interview.

In the proposed research, the case in question is *The nature of VET leadership*. The ten sites or contexts that make up the case of VET leadership are used to establish the nature of VET leadership. Instrumental Case Study has a cross-checking attribute as well through its dual analytic dimensions: *across* the contexts that are the 'sites' of this case, and *within* each context-of-use. Comparison of data across the ten contexts will provide a checking of the data internal to the contexts, as well as identifying any common elements across the settings. Analysis of data within each site provides the specific information about leadership peculiar to that particular configuration.

Emerging results

It is too early to report with any conviction on the results. The best we are able to do at the moment is to report some perceptions or impressions of the data as it has come in from the field. It is with these reservations that we suggest the following as some of the themes or issues that are presently emerging.

In the section of the questionnaire that requires a prioritisation of 'leadership characteristics', the following three characteristics received three or more 'hits'. This data represents on one fifth of the responses to this item, so the emerging significance of this is at the interest level only:

1. Envisages future trends and their impacts on current strategies (4 hits)
2. Demonstrates interpersonal skills by taking the time to talk and listen to others and establish rapport (3 hits)
3. Works to understand the personalities, motivations and other diverse qualities of people (3 hits)

Item one requires 'hard skills'. Items 2 and 3 require 'soft' or generic skills. There appears to be reflected an understanding that to achieve organisational strength necessitates the knowledge of, treatment and encouragement of staff – a 'nurturing' ethos.

This is equally evident when the remaining items prioritised are examined.

The remaining items scored either 3, 2 or no hits.

Definition of leadership item

In Item 12, which asks the respondents to reflect on their own understandings of the nature of leadership in their VET work environments, the following represent five differing 'takes' on effective VET leadership.

1. First there is a quite traditional view of leadership as being initiated and carried by a single 'leader' or manager:

   > Leadership is the function of providing vision of where we intend to get to. Providing open communication and bringing staff with you. (Manager of Regional Group Training Organisation)

2. Second there is a view of leadership as almost solely interpersonal, working from the employee outwards:

   > Leadership is encouragement of each employee. Self-motivation is necessary, so is vision, passion and the ability to be able to communicate effectively. (Small Business Advisory Facilitator)

3. Third is a view of translating big picture visions into 'doable' and 'ownable' units of work for each employee – working from the big picture to the individual:

> Leadership requires that you see the big picture and look at the present and the future. Then you have to be able to translate this into each staff member's own contribution so they perform at their best. (Large Private Provider)

4. Next we have a genetically informed view of leadership:

> Essentially I think you're born a leader! You either have it or you don't. While the word implies, or at least seems to, something directed downwards from above – I've personally flourished best with leaders who've stood back – given me space – told me I could fly and let me go. These leaders have vision and capabilities of dealing with people. That's all that's needed – the ability to recognise strengths and give encouragement, and then stand back and watch it happen. (Senior Consultant for Training Advisory Service)

5. Finally there is an enabling view of leadership which sees organisational goals through the capacity of individuals to understand and own processes and outcomes:

> Leadership is about enabling people to develop and grow within an environment of increasing complexity and change. It is about a reason for people to want to accept responsibility and accountability. It is about controlled devolution in an environment where managers have diminished power and authority and real leaders must develop a climate of trust. (TAFE Institute Director)

We have yet to confirm any trends or themes in these definitions.

The problem of 'context' and interaction
Consistent with the project's aim to ensure a fresh yet empirical and valid analysis of effective VET leadership, the question of context arises as a central question for the study. What *is* the nature of context in which leadership occurs? Does globalisation really affect leadership? In what practical ways? What aspect/s of the leadership context apply at any given time or at any given stage of the leadership process? How does this tie in with the study's assumption that effective leadership is about managing change?

Relationship between 'generic' and 'context-bound' leadership skills
Research needs to account for the counterintuitive explanations of circumstances, and also the intuitive ones. It is intuitive that effective leadership contains within it messages about the characteristics of individuals who might be referred to as leaders. It is counterintuitive that 'effective leadership' is not solely the property of individuals. Instead, 'effective leadership' is suggested by the data, to be related to the ways in which a group of people interacts to enable a common purpose to be achieved. In this case, the issue is one of distinguishing between the characteristics of 'a leader' and 'leadership'.

As a rural VET consultant said, touching on the required blend of generic and context-specific skills,

> …if there is the slightest suggestion that you're twaddling on or that you don't have some sort of credibility in the area in which you are working, a lot of what you say will just run off people. That's where relationships, and even the networking across the regions are important. You are known or someone knows of someone else. So there is that space - credibility - on which you can build something.

The issue of generic or context-bound/specific characteristics of effective leadership is thrown into high relief when viewed from the standpoint outside our culture. This sequence

is the reflections of an Indigenous Council member who is involved with the provision of VET in the Indigenous community:

> One of the things that people [settler Australians] don't understand is that the…dynamics of leadership in Aboriginal communities is so totally different to the leadership within the normal shire councils' business, you know? We go beyond… some of the stuff that shire councils would never ever comprehend or understand - the issues of being elected leaders at the Aboriginal community level…. Aboriginal council [leadership] is different because our people, we look after our people in a holistic manner you know…. An example is funerals in communities. In Aboriginal communities, you know, the whole community gets involved. There is a sense of cultural belonging to ensure that…the different people take their place in assisting the council as leaders. There's an expectation by the people that the leaders have to be there, guiding them in the way the business is done…. There is a lot of different things that we do differently to mainstream, I suppose, [including] leadership.

An intricate relationship between 'generic' and 'context-bound' skills is articulated here. The generic component including the cross-cultural understandings of the workings of the white community and its structures (including the shire councils). This kind of cross-cultural requirement, so obvious to members of the Indigenous community, are skills only recently identified as important for the white community to understand and practice.

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